Beguiled by Beauty

Cultivating a Life of Contemplation and Compassion

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Introduction

How difficult it is to maintain an open heart in these dark days! Climate change performs its destructive work even more quickly than we feared. Hatred is given permission to rage with impunity. Work, school, and religion are often alienating. Technology silently steals our ability to concentrate or think deeply. Our activism can make us sympathize with Sisyphus, condemned to endlessly push a stone up a mountain, only to have it roll back as it nears the summit. Religious commitments sometimes feel dry as dust. But the world remains so tender and lovely, so vulnerable and enigmatic. How can we keep opening our heart to the sorrow and tragedy of the world and yet remain alert to its endlessly proliferating splendors? How can we train ourselves to fall ever more deeply in love with the world without glossing over deception and cruelty?

This book began to percolate many years ago when I started teaching a freshman seminar at Emory University that I called "Contemplating Beauty." The idea came from nowhere and did not seem to be anything but a whim. We read Gregory of Nyssa and Dostoevsky, Natasha Trethewey and Simone Weil. Our readings continually exposed us to the paradoxical intertwining of beauty and compassion. Over the years the power of beauty as a threshold to the divine became deeply rooted in me, changing the way I experience the world. Tragedy and affliction do not operate in some other world, as if the truth of suffering were alien to creation, but are always present or just below the surface of awareness. Beauty does not stand apart, bright and unscathed, but permeates everything. It is heartbreaking to see the interdependence of these things; to acknowledge sacred beauty in the midst of disaster seems a betrayal. To allow in awareness of suffering in a moment of intoxication would seem to spoil it. But becoming aware of the radiance of beauty anoints all events—all people, beings, and environments—with the holy chrism of the sacred.

Like many Protestants, I thought of social responsibility as one thing and enjoying nature or poetry as something completely different.

I understood obligations to a public world but thought little of how the distortions of my mental habits would be mirrored to the world, whether I liked it or not. I did not appreciate how central intimacy or union with the Beloved was to earlier Christians' understanding of how the commandment of love could be practiced. I have studied many forms of contemplative practice and meditation, but I missed the connections between awakening to the beauty of beings, falling in love with the Beloved, and cultivating radical compassion. There are many paths, and for some reason, the path of beauty has called to me.

The beauty of beings is not their external "prettiness." The man on death row, the old woman dying in her bed, the bleached coral reefs are not pretty sights. But this man, this woman, this coral are beautiful and sacred. They are irrevocably woven into the family of being. Glimpsing the raw beauty of beings is a joy. It opens us to the eternal incarnate in time and in flesh. It is also a long sorrow. Beauty is constantly perishing. All things pass away, but too often the beauty of beings perishes because of violence, rapaciousness, indifference, and betrayal.

This book is about a contemplative way of life. It is not so much a description of particular forms of meditation, though the last chapter offers examples of concrete practices one might experiment with. This book describes some ways one might cultivate habits of wonder, attention, compassion, courage, joy. It offers a conversation that might spark your own ways of awakening to beauty and sustaining compassion.

Though there are many exceptions, descriptions of contemplation or meditation often imagine life with sufficient luxury that one can dedicate serious time and energy to religious practices.[1] The monk's cell is the traditional ideal for a contemplative life. I am the mother of three children, a professor, and have walked in dark valleys where hope seemed very dim. I know more than I wish I did about trauma. I mention this because it shapes the way I understand a contemplative way of life. I did not have the time or ability to follow the instructions of dedicated meditators. One can hardly meditate twice a day for twenty minutes or rise before dawn for an hour of practice when every second is dedicated to children, work, and keeping terror at bay. Or maybe you can. But I couldn't. I have no doubt that the ability to dedicate hours, days, and years to religious practice is an enormous gift and may deepen capacities for union and love in ways nothing else can. But that was not my life. There were not many signposts for people in my situation. I thirsted for the Beloved and longed to deepen and purify capacities for courage and compassion. But my dedication to being a

mother and teacher, entangled with the lives of my family and friends, my community and nation, made a contemplative way of life difficult to cultivate.

Whatever your life is like, signposts may feel few and far between. You may be inspired by teachings about prayer, meditation, and contemplation only to crash against the constraints of a busy or difficult life. But whoever we are, we are made for the Beloved and made to share the Beloved's delight in and care for the world. The responsibilities of ordinary life do not alienate us from our nature. They are the environment in which we encounter it. Rather than imagine contemplation as an impossible ideal, it is possible to nurture your spirit within the terms your life is setting for you—whether you are an aging person whose wisdom expands even as your body or concentration diminishes, a delighted and exhausted mother, a person working more hours than there seem to be in a day, someone whose spirituality is damaged by a cruel church community, a trauma survivor who may be triggered rather than supported by meditation books or communities, a retiree with more time available to explore new things, or a pastor eager to find fresh approaches to faith.

For those of us who embrace life in the company of lovers, spouses, children, activity, and work, it may seem that a contemplative way of life is nothing more than a wish or dream. This is only true if we understand monasticism as the only model for spiritual life. If we split apart the world into various dualistic categories, then we tear apart aspects of ourselves that long to be together: activism / spirituality, prayer / work, interiority / public life, family life / contemplation, friendship / universal compassion. Life is a seamless whole. Every part is related to every other part, just as every being is related to every other being. There are no absolute divisions anywhere. Contemplation is not something separate and apart from ordinary life. It is a way to inhabit ordinary life. We might take periods of time for meditation or prayer or contemplative walks or working with a poem or piece of music, but these are not separate "contemplative" moments; they are simply part of the interweaving of life. Brother Lawrence said to a friend, "For me the time of action does not differ from the time of prayer, and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are together calling for as many different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as when upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament."[2] This eye-of-the-hurricane calm may seem a fantastic dream, but it is possible because "God is everywhere, in all places, and there is no spot where we cannot draw near."[3]

A meditation pillow, a lit candle, a quiet corner, and a prayer circle are all very nourishing. These moments of silence and solitude help to cultivate a space within us that is less reactive and open a depth in our heart. When we are able to find moments of prayer and silence, we can become more centered in intimacy with the Beloved. But they do not make the divine Beloved present. They can only make us more aware of the presence, which is there in the pots and pans, at the sickbed, and present while we nurse or cry or type or protest. A contemplative way of life reorients our awareness to the presence that is always with us. There is a sacred energy—the Beloved, Holy Wisdom, the Divine Mother, God, chi, *prana*—that is nearer than our breath. "Everything in the world shares in this energy, contributes to it, benefits from it, is sustained by it. This energy connects us. . . . That is simply the way the universe is made."[4] The Spirit of Goodness is everywhere and always. When we integrate our awareness into it, in whatever ways make sense to our life as it is right now in this moment, we can participate in the beauty and compassion that endlessly flows throughout creation. We weave contemplative awareness into every moment, whatever is happening. We do this more naturally and spontaneously the more we practice it. It is not a duty or something that earns us salvation. It is not a way of perfection or of perfect holiness. It is simply being human, being a creature of spirit and flesh, bearing a flaming and broken heart, and constituted by our infinite connections to others.

This book may be part of the conversation as you think about how you want to nourish your heart's longing for—for what? This yearning may be hard to name. We are creatures of spirit and made for the Beloved, for the ultimate mystery that has no name. As creatures of spirit, our longing for the sacred is not only a private relationship with the holy other. It is a call to honor the sacred worth of every creature. Our inchoate longing is a desire to love more deeply, feel more unconstrained compassion, wonder at the glorious creativity of nature and art. We long to be alive to all that is—the Good beyond all names, the beings that inhabit the world, the creativity of the human spirit, the inconsolable tragedies of our lives and of the world. We desire to be fully alive, but the world does not always support this desire. We are entangled in things that dull our senses and distract us from our loves. Suffering or witness to suffering make us want to become numb to the world and shielded against our own heart.

We cannot love the world without accepting its tragic suffering as part of the whole. I do not know why these are woven together and have

no theories about it. But beings are beautiful and they suffer. Contemplation requires that we intensify our awareness of both of these truths. We often dull down our capacity for beauty because we cannot bear to stay awake for the atrocities that we encounter when we love fragile creatures. It requires so much courage and strength to endure love for the beauty of the world. As Galway Kinnell points out, love requires courage: "perhaps it *is* courage, and even perhaps *only* courage."[5]

We cannot expect to live a contemplative life or to love the world or even love one single thing in it without courage and without sustained resources to feed our courage. The very word "courage" comes from the word for heart. If we want our heart to live, we must feed it and nourish it. Contemplating the beauty of beings is one way to do this—in the ordinariness of life, in the unending bodying forth of the divine goodness in the depth and width and height of creation.

I would like to express my gratitude to early readers, Liz McGeachy and Sue Gilbertson. Their suggestions and encouragement meant the world to me. I also am—again—still grateful to my editors: Robert Ratcliff who has seen this through and most especially to Dan Braden for his seemingly endless patience and kindness.

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Contemplation on the Borderlands

> "Love all of God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love. Love the animals: God has given them the rudiments of thought and joy untroubled."
>
> "For we acknowledge unto You that all is like an ocean, all is flowing and blending, and that to withhold any measure of love from anything in Your universe is to withhold the same measure from you."[1]

> "It is about the loveliness and beauty of the dance of God in the midst of this 'ball of confusion.' It is about God's love and compassion for this earth with all its creatures and for us human creatures with our beautiful and ugly ways."[2]

We live in a time of turmoil and possibility. "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold."[3] The Spirit must be engaged in a wild and desperate dance. One hopeful sign in these dangerous times is the recovery within Christianity—and beyond—of practices of contemplation and meditation. These practices are not an escape from turmoil but disciplines that open our hearts wider to the world's tragedy and beauty, however difficult times become.

Contemplative practices have accompanied Christianity from its beginnings: "whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door" and pray to the Beloved (Matt. 6:6). Even though much of the rich history of Christian contemplation has been exiled to underground channels, in the last few decades contemplative practices have flowed out of monasteries and convents and into lay communities. Centering prayer and other forms of meditation—chant; contemplation of Scripture (*lectio divina*) or poetry, music, art, icons; wilderness experiences; retreats and prayer groups—all flourish.

This revival is partly due to contemplative Christianity reaching out to contemplative practices in other traditions. His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh have been inspiring ambassadors of Buddhist practices of compassion and meditation. Japanese Zen meditation has been around in the United States even longer. People are more

aware of different Indian practices, including yoga, chant, and many forms of meditation. Sufi poetry has made us aware of a new kind of spiritual friendship with Islam. These conversations and crossover practices are a welcome way of enriching our understanding of the religions. As Pope John XXIII said in 1962, "In the present order of things, divine providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by human effort and even beyond human expectation, are directed toward the fulfillment of God's higher and inscrutable designs; and everything, even human differences, leads to the greater good of the Church."[4] These religious dialogues, though not entirely new to Christianity, have greatly expanded our spiritual imagination and reminded us of treasures in our past that we had forgotten.

Some people find their way to Christian contemplation through interreligious dialogue. Others are seeking a more experiential approach to their faith. In addition to worship and church community, they want to explore something of their own interiority and augment public worship with an opening of the heart in silent prayer. Still others find themselves unwilling exiles from the church. While many in the LGBTQ+ community find themselves in warm and welcoming church communities, there are too many others who have been rejected by their community. Forced to choose between hiding themselves from family and church or being told they are going to hell, they find a third way and simply leave their faith family. Many women have become fatigued by the effort to find themselves included somewhere in the church's patriarchal language, and the subtle—or not-so-subtle—disparagement of their voices. For some, the social conservatism of their church feels at odds with the gospel of love and the prophets' cry for justice. For still others, a liturgy built around a story of sin, punishment, and forgiveness fails to speak to their existential reality. On the other hand, someone might appreciate the theological and social openness of a more progressive church but find it dull or uninspiring. For these reasons and others, Americans are increasingly identifying themselves as spiritual but not religious or identifying with no particular religious community or tradition.

Whether one is fascinated by religious dialogue, enriching one's faith, or seeking to quench a spiritual thirst on the margins of organized religion, many are finding that there is a rich conversation about contemplative practice and meditation within Christianity and on its borderlands. This book is written for all these seekers and holy wanderers. My own background is Christian; I am a theologian and come from

a long line of ministers and family members devoted to their church. I don't think of myself as an expert, but I have studied some of the great texts of Christian mysticism from its early days to the present moment. I have also studied Christian meditation practices for many years and have been incorporating silent retreats into my life for more than two decades. I have studied other traditions with some care and find much that enriches Christianity or allows me to understand it in a new way. The Buddhist emphasis on compassion is not new to Christianity, but it allows me to see things in the stories of Jesus that I had not noticed. Yoga's attention to bodily practices makes me rethink ways Christians have used and abused their bodies in the service of their faith. Slaves, Shakers, and others have danced and sang their faith. Hesychasts have used breath and visualization to pray. But Christians have also tormented their bodies with penitential practices or ignored them altogether. The recovery of bodily prayer is a great enrichment to contemplative practice. The centrality of the natural world to indigenous or Celtic spiritualities return me to the Bible and earlier Christian writings to discover a celebration of the earth as sacred, which I had not realized was there—even as it expands my thinking beyond these sources.

Every person and community of faith must reforge the gospel for their own time. Images and practices that make sense during one historical epoch or in response to some particular social challenge do not seamlessly translate to another era. The gospel is living and moving. This vitality of faith is anticipated in Jesus' farewell address to his disciples in the Gospel of John. He promises he will send the Paraclete, a comforter who will lead them in all truth (John 15:26). Early Christianity also knew of a mysterious holy Spirit who dances through time and space, weaving ancient and eternal truths into the ever-changing historical moment. Pope John emphasized the need to courageously embrace the living power of the gospel in a new way: "it is not the Gospel that changes; it is we who begin to understand it better. . . . The moment has arrived when we must recognize the signs of the times, seize the opportunity, and look far abroad."[5]

Contemplative practice is one ancient and novel way the Spirit is leading us into this moment of our history. We live in dangerous times, and they will only get more precarious as climate change takes its relentless toll, disrupting nature and societies, tempting us to turn to hatred and ideologies that offer an illusory sense of security. A commitment to a contemplative way of life may contribute to the capacity to endure these times with an open and courageous heart. Rosemarie Freeney

Harding, one of the great civil rights mothers, knew well what it was to live through outrages and the defeats of hope. Yet she describes the power of the Spirit to draw "circles of protection and power around us even as we look elsewhere. Teaching about how to be family. How to live like family. How to live with some strength and care in your hands. How to live with some joy in your mouth. How to put your hands gentle on where the wound is and draw out the grief. How to urge some kind of mercy into the shock-stained earth so that that good will grow."[6] A contemplative way of life can enable us to participate in this work of the Spirit more deeply, compassionately, and joyfully.

A WORD ON LANGUAGE

About halfway through *The Color Purple*, Celie tells Shug she has rejected God—who allowed so many horrifying things to happen to her and who has never listened to any black woman. Wild and life-filled Shug is shocked and asks Celie what she thinks God looks like: "He big and old and tall and graybearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted . . . [eyes] sort of bluish-gray Cool. Big though. White lashes." Shug quickly disabuses her of the idea that God is a judgmental, harsh white man. She tells Celie that for her, the "first step away from this old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being a part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and run all around the house." Shug acknowledges it is hard to get this angry white-man-god out of one's head, but "You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a'tall."[7]

Contemplation can be a powerful antidote to our mental habit of thinking of God as an angry or royal (white) man. As one enters more deeply into the wordless mystery of the divine, language is less *about* God and more a poetical invocation *of* divine goodness. As the divine white man begins to lose his grip, we are able to see a bit better.

Our minds are deeply shaped by the ideas we carry around in our heads about "God," often images we absorbed in childhood. It is therefore important to use wildly creative language about divine reality, to use words and images that will help to unpin our minds from ingrained images. It is not that images are bad; we cannot think without images.

Though divine reality is mirrored in no earthly image, we cannot think of divine reality without images. But the attachment to images, especially oppressive ones, is unfortunate. If we forget that divine goodness is infinitely more than our small minds can hold, we will be anxious when our ideas begin to change. When an image is challenged or becomes toxic, we seem to lose "God" altogether. Contemplation helps us to open our minds to a number of images so that no one image is allowed to claim authority in defining who God is. Images modify each other: God is Father but also Mother. God is Lady Love but also Holy Wisdom. We become more open to new ways of thinking about our relationship to divine Goodness. We come nearer to relationship and are less dependent on static or barren images. I tend to avoid the word "God" for the most part. It is a fine word, but it is so freighted with predetermined meanings—a man reaching out to touch Adam's hand on the Sistine Chapel, a frowning judge, a justice-loving or cruelly arbitrary divine monarch. It is difficult to allow our minds to roam toward less manly images. I use a variety of terms: Beloved, Divine Mother, Goodness, Bright Abyss, Divine Emptiness, Dance, Spirit, Lady Love, Wisdom, as well as others.

As there are no adequate images for divine reality, neither is there a gender. The second commandment warns us against creating an image of God from anything in the earth, above the earth in the heavens, or below the earth (Exod. 20:4). This is a fairly comprehensive rejection of images, including gender, as appropriate to God. For that reason, I employ gendered language (She, He), nonbinary language (They), and nongendered language (It, Spirit, Dance, Good, Abyss) throughout the text. This may seem jarring if one is used to something more traditional. It may feel strange to use the nonbinary term "They" for God. As feminists argued a long time ago—and people of every color and ethnicity also knew—the words and images we use for divine Goodness carries over to the way we value human beings. If God is a man then only men are divine. If we believe that the utterly inclusive love of the divine Goodness created all of humanity, then our language must include everyone—women, nonbinary, men, gay, straight, trans, people of every color, ethnicity, and religion—everyone. I believe it is good for our minds and our spirits to adventure through language in ways that are deliberately jarring to our preconceptions and mental pictures. As Meister Eckhart says: "I pray God rid me of god."[8] That is, may divine reality displace the small thoughts about the divine that imprison my mind.

RADICAL COMPASSION

Our images of the divine are reflected in how we treat others. Perhaps paradoxically, religion can train us to be hostile or indifferent toward others. For millions of Christians, belief in God has done little to stop them from despising groups of people they categorize as dangerous or inferior. For some, the gospel is consistent with racism; the domination of women; the exploitation of refugees, immigrants, and people of other faiths; and the colonization of other lands and of the earth itself. The gospel has done little to reveal the agony suffered by hungry children or impoverished families. It has turned a blind eye to the devastation of forests, oceans—whole species and ecosystems. The biblical prophets rail against the powerful institutions of ancient Israel who perform their cultic service but grind the faces of the poor into the dust (e.g., Deut. 27:19; Isa. 3:15). From a biblical point of view, this kind of worship is indistinguishable from idolatry. One might as well worship a golden calf as this cultic god that cares nothing for creation.

On the other hand, many people, including people of faith, become interested in meditation in order to obtain relief from stress or perhaps from the restless meaninglessness that haunts the edges of consciousness. Meditation promises a variety of benefits: lower blood pressure, healthier organs, a more relaxed attitude, an antidote to stress. These are all to be highly prized in our stressful world. Meditation also promotes a deeper level of peacefulness. A religious person may hope to feel closer to God. All of these are worthy goals and in our stressful world can contribute to improved mental, physical, even spiritual health. This is a significant good in itself.

But if we think of contemplative practice primarily in this way, we might come away with the stereotype of someone who remains preoccupied only with their own benefit. We might spurn contemplative practices as fundamentally selfish or a distraction from more active engagement in the world. Or we might seek it out for precisely that reason—it promises relief from the painfulness of life. As worthy as self-improvement, relaxation, and spiritual benefits are, they are not the purpose of a contemplative way of life.

When we love Divine Goodness more deeply, we love the world more passionately. When we love and care for the world, we fall more deeply into divine reality. "God" is not just a magical being in whom we are instructed to believe, but the unnamable, infinite goodness that Christians know as love. When we love one another more beautifully,

we enter into the divine realm—whatever our names for it might be. Regardless of the words we use, the primary sign that one loves God is that one loves other people and the world itself. As Julian of Norwich instructs Margery Kemp, her religious experiences are only authentic if they "profit her fellow Christians."[9] Or as Marguerite Porete puts it, there is "no lesser way."[10]

It is impossible to overemphasize that the core practice of a contemplative way of life is radical compassion. One's concentration may be impossibly wandering. One may not be able to sing three notes of a chant. A headstand may prove impossible. Securing twenty minutes twice a day for prayer may be no more realistic than growing wings and flying to the moon. These things are instruments that a contemplative might use, but they are not themselves what constitute a contemplative way of life.

A contemplative way of life is motivated by a devotion to the welfare of others. However much we remain caught up in the inexorable demands of life, "seared with trade and bleared with toil," we may yet burn with a sense of sorrow for the world's suffering.[11] We may feel discouraging pain as we observe the hate speech, acts of violence, the calculated indifference of our times, the horrifying hostility to truthfulness. It may be that this concern for suffering and injustice inspires in you or your community participation in social activism. Or it may simply make you want to binge watch the most recent Netflix series. The difficulty and crisis of the world is overwhelming. It is virtually impossible to bear it without very deep resources. Without watering our roots in deep and life-giving waters, awareness of radical suffering, injustice, and turmoil is likely to distort our capacities for care and responsibility.

The feeling of tenderness toward others is rooted in the source of compassion, the Divine Beloved. This is why the twin love commandments are really the same. The possibility of radical compassion arises as we deepen our relationship with ultimate reality, known to Christians by many names, most often as "God." We can tell whether we are worshiping the divine Goodness or an idol of our imagination by the fruits of our worship. Love, compassion, and social justice are the fruits of loving God. Cruelty, hubris, selfishness, and hostility to creation suggest that, whatever names we are using, we are worshiping an idol.

Set your heart on radical compassion—a living desire that the suffering of others be alleviated, no matter who they are. Radical compassion does not impose conditions that say some are worthy of compassion and others are not. It does not limit compassion to certain groups of people. It does not indulge in hatred or demean opponents. We may

feel the edge of compassion when we find it difficult or impossible to wish a particular person or group well or when we are motivated by rage at destructive people. But we can recognize this limitation of our heart as alien to our deepest desire, and we can work to weaken the resistance we feel. We do not have to wish that someone who has harmed us or others thrives in their evil-doing. Radical compassion resists harmful acts, but it also recognizes that to do evil is itself a kind of suffering, and therefore one can wish for their transformation.

When we begin any particular meditation, prayer, or contemplative practice, it is useful to remind ourselves that the deepest reason for practice is the generation of radical compassion. Likewise, we can use all of our daily practices—driving, laundry, work, rest, recreation, pleasure, obligations—as opportunities to increase joy in others and compassion for their suffering. We can gently and nonjudgmentally notice where we are stuck or limited. "Ah yes, I see you. Still enraged. Still terrified. Still distracted." The intention toward radical compassion is what distinguishes a spiritual or religious practice from a secular desire for one's own well-being. It is also the source of our greatest joy.

CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE AS INTERIOR TRANSFORMATION

At the beginning, middle, and end we must remember that practice is always for the world. Something that concerns only one's private welfare or contentment may be useful and important, but it is not what I mean by a contemplative way of life. This does not mean that we do nothing that serves our private good or need for pleasure or relaxation. A balanced life is likely to include all the parts of ourselves. I suspect that we do more good in the world if we can also enjoy the small things that give us pleasure and if we carve out time to nurture our well-being. A gray-faced, righteous, and withered ascetic may not invite confidence. A contemplative way of life need not draw sharp lines between what is permitted or not permitted. But it does invite us to discern what is truly life-giving for ourselves and others.

While a contemplative way of life rests in a yearning for the good of all creation, it focuses on interior transformation as an important element of care for others. This attention to interiority as the source of radical compassion distinguishes a contemplative way of life from secular meditation, which may pay more attention to certain benefits

such as relaxation or pain relief. It also distinguishes it from social activism, which so externalizes world engagement that it may fail to notice the ways negative habits infiltrate the work for justice.

Attention to interior transformation may decolonize our minds so that we choose better how to act and respond to the world. But another reason interior work is so important is that our effect on the world is not limited to the things we consciously choose to do or say. Our choices certainly matter, but we powerfully affect the world simply by the sort of person we are. A person might be rather taciturn and yet radiate such a deep kindness that they change the energy in a room. This kindness might be expressed in word and deed, but it is also conveyed unconsciously—it is like a sweet smell that comes off jasmine. Does the jasmine do something to spread its sent? More likely, by simply being jasmine its beautiful scent is effortlessly emitted.

We are not solitary mind-bodies jumbled together with others like old dolls in a closet, juxtaposed but disconnected. We are complex beings deeply interdependent upon an infinite number of other beings, some known, many not known to us. Neither are we rational beings freely choosing and acting in ways that we completely understand and control. We influence those around us in ways we are hardly aware of. Much of our mind and motivation is hidden from us. We are creatures of spirit and in the realm of spirit, everything is related to everything else. There are no hard boundaries separating "self" from "other." This means that what we do—and perhaps even more—what we *are* affects others. We cannot know all the ways we touch other lives. We cannot count on all of our acts or decisions being helpful or wise. But we can train in such a way that some goodness in us becomes more spontaneous. This goodness will be communicated to others in ways we do not control, just as what is limited or harsh or despairing is transmitted whether we wish it so or not—simply because it resides inside of us. We can train so that we might say or do the exactly right thing at a crucial moment to make an extraordinary difference. And we may never know we did it. What matters is that we prepare ourselves to act well, even though we will never perceive all the good (and bad) that we actually accomplish.

For this reason, though contemplative practice is for the world, it has to do with our interior lives. This can cause confusion. Because in contemplation we are attending to our interior life, it can seem as if our focus is self-centered, merely "navel-gazing." It can also be the case that we meditate only for some perceived benefit to ourselves and take no

particular interest in the welfare of others. But the spirit in us craves liberation from selfishness and remains discontent and frustrated until we begin to open our hearts to others, even though this is emotionally dangerous. Removing obstacles to compassion and joy is interior work, but it is for the world and is expressed in the way we relate to the world: the cleaning products we buy and the clothes we wear; who we vote for and where our money goes; how we relax and refresh ourselves; how we treat family members, neighbors, coworkers, people who work for us, strangers. The fruit of a contemplative life will be realized in our decisions and actions, but it will also be expressed in what our eyes do when we look at someone. It will invisibly perfume off of us beyond what we consciously intended.

When we care for ourselves, we are better able to care for others. Mothers cannot care for the needs of their children well if they do not or cannot care for themselves. It is not selfish to care for oneself; it is necessary for the good of the world. But as we engage more deeply with contemplative practices, we discover that the membrane between ourselves and others is much thinner than we realized—for better and for worse. If a mother is under a great deal of stress and difficulty, however careful she is to protect her children from her stress, they will perceive it and be affected by it. None of us are free to eliminate stresses in our lives. But to the extent that we can nurture ourselves and find joy and contentment, we are better able to convey to others the courage and love we desire for them. Whatever our spiritual formation is, it will inevitably be released into the world, whether we wish it so or not. If our lives shape us in a way that makes us more selfish or more depressed or cynical, if we are formed to fear or demean others, all of these things will be released into the world and affect people in ways we do not necessarily recognize. But if we pursue practices that heal us and open our hearts, however imperfect we inevitably remain, the good we desire will also be released into the world, also in ways we may never know anything about.

It is rather terrifying to think that the causes of well-being and unhappiness lie deep inside us and we share them without knowing it. What loving mother wants to communicate her anxiety to her children? What dedicated teacher wants to convey their cynicism or anger to their students? We may wish to do good in the world, but we will communicate what we are, even if that is different from what we wish to be. We may feel real compassion, but if we are tyrannized by fear, we will not be able to convey our compassion as fully as we wish. We might wish to be open to all but convey a demeaning attitude because

of internalized—perhaps unrecognized—habits of racism or homophobia. To become the people we yearn to be requires attention to what is invisible and unconscious. A contemplative way of life is therefore not a straightforward journey into the land of peace and love. It is an encounter with inner demons. It is much more like a fairy tale, replete with dangerous forests and wild beasts.

THERE BE DRAGONS

The contemplative life presents many difficulties. It is a fantasy to imagine that a dedication to Lady Love will bring only happiness and equanimity. Some meditators are surprised to discover that meditation increases their unease by bringing to the surface bad memories, negative mental habits, even traumatic experiences. Or they find their understanding of God is challenged in disorienting ways they did not expect. This can feel like a betrayal of the purpose of meditation, as if they were promised candy and received bitter vegetables. Thomas Keating once scoffed at the idea that centering prayer gave one a deeper level of peace, saying that after the first few weeks or months, it made one less peaceful than ever. The work of "unloading the unconscious" is not pleasant.[12] Meditation and contemplation do not leave us unchanged. They force us to encounter things that might be painful. We learn more about ourselves. The blinders we have been wearing to the suffering of the world will begin to come off. It is as if our own minds and the world around us are being unwrapped from the gauzy covering we placed over them because the beauty and suffering of the world is just too intense. Because the interior journey is unpredictable and not always pretty, it needs to be undertaken with care and in the company of wise guides.

Sometimes it is suffering that awakens someone to the border lands of contemplation. Of course, suffering can make one more enraged, addicted, violent, or depressed. But it can also break us open to the realm of the spirit, enticing us toward deeper understanding and tenderness for others. If we think of spirituality as the region of light and purity, or if we think that only good things happen to good people, suffering will seem antithetical to spiritual practice. But suffering will inevitably arise—as democratic and universal as a heartbeat. Contemplation does not protect us from suffering nor does suffering or even trauma make us unfit for contemplation. Suffering is part of the untidiness of life and an inevitable part of contemplative commitments.

Suffering requires tending and care. But it can open up a depth in the soul, which can also make someone more available to the spiritual journey. I do not mean that suffering is inherently "good for us" or that we should seek out suffering as a spiritual exercise. The world is likely to be more than generous in this regard. Because suffering is an ever-present part of life, contemplation incorporates it into the journey. There is a way that the stories of saints have been told that may make us think of them as great heroes, filled with fiery and fearless determination. Unencumbered by doubts, impervious to suffering, onward they go like indominable soldiers of Christ. The historical record tells a different story. Many, perhaps most, of the great contemplatives, reformers, and agents of change experienced great suffering, serious illness, danger, or what we would now call trauma. Francis was a tortured soul, enduring great physical suffering and disappointed anguish until his dying day. Clare spent much of her life on a sickbed. Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, George Fox, Mary Fisher, Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin Luther King Jr., and Desmond Tutu were among the countless devotees of the Beloved who were cruelly persecuted. Catherine of Genoa, Teresa of Avila, and Julian of Norwich took up their tasks only after near-death experiences. St. John of the Cross grew up hungry and often homeless and was cruelly tortured by fellow Carmelites. Sojourner Truth endured the cruelties of slavery. Howard Thurman faced the endless assaults of racism. And yet somehow for these and countless others, extremes of suffering broke them open to recognize the Beloved and the Beloved in all persons.

Suffering does not have to lead to spiritual exploration, but it can. Beautiful gifts of the human spirit sometimes arise when someone cracked open by affliction finds their way to the Beloved and to greater tenderness for creation. These witnesses may help us recognize ourselves as beloved, even when suffering or contempt tempt us to despise ourselves.

Suffering creates vulnerabilities that make the pursuit of a contemplative way of life both urgent and fragile. Contemplatives who are in the throes of deep suffering may need to take the advice from books with a grain of salt. A distinctive mark of past witnesses is that the path they ended up taking was one that had no markers and few guides. Suffering can take us off the beaten track of religious belief and practice, but it can also reveal amazing vistas.

It can also happen that the disciplines of meditation and contemplation become disconnected from the radical compassion and appropriate

humility that moor healthy spirituality. The person may experience many benefits and perhaps gain a kind of charisma that makes them seem attractive and inspiring. But practices intended to generate inner freedom and kindness are put in the service of relationships of domination. You may know of people who meditate regularly or even are popular public teachers who sexually exploit followers; are cold, dismissive, arrogant; or who abuse family members. Meditation is not a magical wand, and one can be quite adept at a variety of contemplative practices and remain a jackass. Worse, a charisma may develop that gives someone greater power over people.

Every single thing in life can be an instrument of good or bad. Contemplation does not protect you from pain or mistakes. It does not guarantee steady "progress"—whatever that means. It does not guarantee that a teacher can be trusted. But "rooted and grounded in love" and in the healthy humility that does not attach too much importance either to mistakes or to accomplishments, it can contribute to a deeply meaningful and joyful life.

CONTEMPLATIVE WAY OF LIFE, CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES, MEDITATION

I am using several terms that form a constellation of ideas. In earlier Christianity, contemplation meant a form of awareness in which the heart-mind became identified with divine reality. One was not only thinking about God but also becoming one with God. Meditation preceded this non-dualistic form of awareness. One meditated in the sense of holding one's attention on something. This was not thinking about something but was rather holding onto something in a more single-minded way. For example, one might engage in a period of prayer on Scripture. One would begin simply by reading the passage and perhaps thinking about it. But one would then begin to attune one's mind to the passage, not trying to figure it out but to begin to enter into it so the passage became on object of meditation. Eventually (ideally) the meditation would fall away, just as thinking about the passage had fallen away during meditation. The heart had opened to that dimension where divinity and humanity mingle and the separation of one from the other is not as vivid. One enters a space of unitive awareness.[13]

People who practiced this way very seriously did more than meditate for twenty minutes twice a day. A whole way of life emerged to produce

a kind of synergy in which mind, emotion, body, service, relationships, worship, desire, and understanding all conspire to gradually clear away obstacles to unconstrained love of God and creation. The classical literature on Christian contemplation is filled with descriptions of this passion for union with the Beloved. In its purest sense, unitive consciousness may be something relatively few people fully experience. But we are all held together in the unity of being and so can enjoy the thought that such a thing is possible for human beings. And we can get glimpses and tastes of it in dramatic and in very simple ways. It is the path of elite spiritual athletes and also of ordinary people living unremarkable lives.

There are a number of good books that describe methods or techniques for learning how to meditate. They do not all propose the same way of thinking about meditation. But for our purposes, let us understand meditation as a period of nonverbal prayer in which the mind gently focuses on some object or state of openness. It is a kind of concentration in the sense one is giving focused attention to a period of prayer rather than day-dreaming and wool-gathering (as useful as these relaxed mental states are). But it also (as Cynthia Bourgeault insists) a kind of intention.[14] There are many kinds of meditation and various schools of thought that describe this focused state of prayer in different ways.

Contemplation in the older texts tends to refer to unitive consciousness. But in the contemporary period it has a more fluid meaning. Sometimes people use contemplation and meditation interchangeably. Contemplative studies is now a concentration in a number of universities.[15] Often these studies combine the neuroscience of meditative practices with an exploration of contemplative practices in various religions. For our purposes, contemplation refers to a wide variety of spiritual practices, including but not limited to meditation. One might take up a contemplative attitude toward cooking or walking or nursing a baby. One might sing or dance, chant or exercise in a contemplative way. One might engage in works of social justice from a contemplative frame of mind.

A contemplative way of life refers to a general attitude for integrating all the aspects of one's life into a spiritual whole. In this sense, one does engage in particular practices of prayer, service, and meditation. But more important, one engages all of one's life from a contemplative perspective. Commitment to a contemplative way of life emphasizes the possibility of experiencing a holistic approach. There is nothing that is not contemplative—or at least nothing that is excluded in principle

from a contemplative life. One is guided by a general desire to weave ordinary life with the Beloved and see how ordinary actions contribute to a gentle transformation toward greater liberty, steadier joyfulness, and more courageous compassion. Contemplation can have positive effects on our minds and bodies. But its real power is to enflame us with love for the world.

Our deepest well-being arises when the anguish of egocentrism begins to give way to an ability to see and delight in others as really real. When we recognize the tender beauty of all beings, we find that we long for their well-being. We realize that our happiness and unhappiness is bound up with the happiness and unhappiness of others. Indifference is not an option. Contemplation requires a good deal of courage. It is the purpose of contemplation to provide concrete ways of living that will sustain an open heart to the world.

Work, sex, parenting, shopping, leisure, prayer, friendship can all be included within a sense of contemplative purpose. "Ultimate reality is in everything, not lurking behind it."[16] Or, as Richard Rohr wrote in his daily meditation, Christianity is about being at home in the world and loving the Beloved by loving the world. "*What you choose now, you shall have later* seems to be the realization of the saints. Not an idyllic hope for a later heaven but a living experience right now. We cannot jump over this world, or its woundedness, and still try to love God. We must love God *through, in, with* and even *because of* this world."[17]

And yet, it is not the case that a contemplative way of life is always more peaceful, joyful, free, courageous, compassionate. It means that in the ebb and flow of life, in the dark moments of experience and of history, in the horrifying acknowledgment of ways you might have harmed someone or been harmed, in the bracing awareness of how deeply embedded certain negative mental patterns are—one remains dedicated to the vast and mysterious, tragic and beautiful world cherished by the Beloved. This is not a "way of perfection." But it is a way of life worth living, whatever happiness and defeat one encounters along the way.

BEAUTY

I am approaching such a life from the perspective of beauty. This is not because other ways are not just as good or better. But focusing on beauty brings to light things that are easy to overlook about spirituality.

Without remembering beauty, one might think of spirituality more in terms of beliefs or emptying the mind or ascetical disciplines. We might think of spirit disconnected from the body, art, and nature. But beauty is the threshold to Divine Goodness and a door into radical compassion. When we fall in love with the beauty of the world, we care all the more passionately about the well-being of the environment and all of the beings in the world. When our heart drops its barriers and perceives the great beauty that constantly surrounds us, we cannot help but respect and protect living creatures and their environments. We are each beautiful and cherished beings. Perceiving our own beauty and vulnerability, we are more inclined to seek our genuine well-being—driven neither by unhealthy self-sacrifice nor unhealthy habits.

Beauty here does not mean simply an aesthetic response to something pretty, though that is a very pleasant experience. When I asked my freshmen what they thought beauty meant, their examples tended to circulate around movie stars and sunsets. With respect to my dear students, this reflects a degeneration of beauty into nice experiences. It is a disenchantment of beauty that redirects it to the logic of the marketplace. But after we watched the film *Waste Land*, their ideas about beauty changed. The film is about the return of the artist Vik Muniz to Brazil, where he befriends the *catadores*. These people pick out recyclable material from mountains of trash in Jardim Gramacho, the largest landfill in the world. With their help, he created works of art in which the workers serve as models for incredibly powerful portraits, not with paint or charcoal but with trash.

This film moves the viewer far beyond prettiness toward the intense dignity of people at the far margins of society. The beauty of their spirits is all the more luminous as it emerges from the raw ugliness of their environment. The beauty of the art, created from trash but capturing some of the beauty of the models, allows us to witness an alchemy in which what is despised—trash and its pickers—is transformed into great art. At the same time, art prized by museums and collectors, expresses the moral beauty of the *catadores* and their community that is far removed from the business of art. Beauty of persons, of art, of community and justice awakens us not to prettiness but to something luminous and transforming.

Beauty is not something beheld primarily by the eyes. It is beheld by the spirit—it reveals the truth of beings. Something that might be considered physically unattractive, like a community of trash pickers, is revealed to be of sacred worth. In an unattractive and oppressive

environment, the beauty of hard-won human dignity shines brightly. The eyes of the spirit perceive that art is not simply a business transacting cultural commodities. Art is a revelation of the spirit. It is beautiful because it moves the spirit and awakens it—not to moralism but to the depth of life's tragedy, playfulness, poignancy, loveliness.

Beauty is perceived by the spirit. As a spiritual matter, it must be cultivated. It requires energy and a kind of spiritual pedagogy. When we read the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, William Blake, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton, or Mary Oliver, we encounter people who did not just open their eyes and see color and shape. We find in them people who perceived with eyes of the spirit and in seeing with physical and spiritual eyes, they entered into the truth of things in their raw and luminous beauty. In the absence of the practice of beauty, "These things, these things were here and but the beholder wanting."[18]

Beauty reveals the relationship between the divine goodness and the world. In the early sixth century, Pseudo-Dionysius described God as "beguiled by beauty."[19] Divine goodness fell in love with creation and so was compelled to bring it into being. The zeal and eros of God for creation is manifest in the beauty of beings, which are themselves expressions of the divine beauty. Beauty, sadly overlooked in our modern times, is a link between the human spirit and the divine goodness.

Through the doorway of beauty, we walk into the divine realm and begin to perceive creation—to speak poetically—more the way the Beloved perceives it. Creation is vastly complex, diverse, wild. It can be enslaved to human need, but it cannot be contained. The smallest patch of land is home to countless beings—plants, animals, and those strange creatures that are neither or both. If we pause and calm our minds for a moment, the natural world can appear to us not merely in its aesthetic wonder—though this is important. It appears to us as if a layer has been removed, and the inner light of the trees, moss, ocean tides, stars, flowing waterfall shine forth. This light reveals the truth of creation—we are beautiful, and for this we were made.

Human beings are a part of creation and are also complex, diverse, wild. For reasons neither religious mythologies nor scientific theories fully unveil, we are estranged from our place in creation, from one another, from ourselves, and from the Beloved. Moral ugliness scars the luminosity of our sacred goodness. But this goodness is created and cherished by the Beloved. It therefore participates in a kind of eternity. What is beautiful and sacred in us cannot be destroyed, however much it can be marred. Contemplating the beauty of human beings begins

to open our eyes to the truth of who we are. In the perception of the beauty of beings we begin to dwell in the divine kingdom promised us when we see as Jesus did: seeing Christ in all beings, especially the "least of these" (Matt. 25).

Creation is interdependent. In a completely literal sense, everything is related to everything else so deeply that the well-being of one contributes to and depends upon the well-being of everything else. This is true in the human realm, too, but we are able to hide this truth from ourselves and believe that the sufferings of injustice, poverty, hunger, oppression, imprisonment, misogyny, racism, war, environmental harm, and a thousand other dismemberments cannot harm us. The practice of recognizing and cherishing beauty does not tolerate this lie. The loving eye pays attention to details and begins to glimpse the paradise of beauty that is endlessly unfolding throughout the cosmos. From its simplest beginning "endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved."[20] A contemplative way of life begins to taste this beauty and cherish the beauty of beings.

A GENERAL OUTLINE OF THIS BOOK

This book will lay out some ways to think about why we practice and how we might practice a way of beauty. These are examples. Each person, given who you are at the moment, given your resources and challenges will discover for yourself what makes life rich, courageous, generous, joyful. My remarks may prod you to imagine for yourself how contemplation, beauty, and compassion might weave through life.

Contemplative practice arises from two aspects of our being. One is our natural tendency toward the good—both ordinary good things and also the ultimate Good—the Beloved, God. We are made for this—the desire for contemplation arises from our core identity. The next two chapters describe ways in which we are made for the divine goodness and for the beauty of the world. This created goodness makes us yearn for the Good we have barely begun to imagine. But obviously, this yearning runs into a thousand obstacles.

The second reason we practice is so that we can acknowledge and address those things within ourselves and our society that impede our desire to love Holy Wisdom and Her world. Our social world does not support spiritual values. We are deeply shaped by the conscious and unconscious patterns through which we experience the world: racism

or sexism, a disposition toward anger or dispiritedness, judgmentalism or anxiety, workaholism and other addictions—and so on. We are all too busy, too overwhelmed by the pleasures and problems of an electronic age, too disconnected from human and natural contact. We might be laboring under the yoke of an oppressive, even cruel, religious upbringing, which makes religion dangerous and abusive. We may have experienced afflictive suffering or trauma that shadows us like a curse. We may be exhausted, demoralized, or angry activists whose moral indignation has overshadowed the reason we care about justice in the first place. We may find it difficult to accept that caring for ourselves is a good in itself and contributes to the good we want to do in the world. Or we may wish to learn to meditate as a way to seek private satisfaction—so spiritual practice becomes another device for separating ourselves from others. Chapters four through seven discuss ways to cultivate habits of courage, delight, and compassion and to address obstacles that are a natural and integral part of a contemplative path. Difficulties in ourselves and in our world will always be with us. Much of a contemplative way of life is training in ways to respond to obstacles with gentleness and tenderness. These chapters give examples of ways we might disempower unhelpful mental patterns and cultivate more wholesome ones. In addition to cultivating positive habits, it is useful to find time to dedicate to particular practices of prayer, meditation, and contemplation. The last chapter describes examples of how one might integrate contemplative practices into one's daily life.

When we think about a contemplative approach to life, we often see the brilliant light far ahead leading us on or the distant mountain top invisible in its crown of clouds. We read about great mystics, Tibetan lamas, and civil rights leaders and yearn for their greatness. We hear about a life that is more peaceful, compassionate, and filled with gentleness, wisdom, and courage. And then we wake up and find ourselves in the same old life we have been living all along. We try to meditate and "fail" because our thoughts are as busy as a traffic jam on Atlanta's I-285. We are still impatient with our children or hooked by the psychodramas at work. And so we renounce our desire and find the consolations nearest at hand.

The most perfect way to practice is the one that we actually do, with all its brokenness, false starts, mistakes, and confusions. This is life. Contemplation does not take us out of life but deeper into it. A contemplative way of life helps to enlarge the heart so that it has the courage to take in more. It gives us clearer eyes to perceive the beauty of

the world. It increases our capacity for joy and compassion in difficult moments and in happy ones. It also contributes to a sense of acceptance when these virtues continue to evade us. We pursue a contemplative way of life to intensify spiritual capacities. But we also do this for the same reason we go for a walk. It might be good for us. But we do it because it enriches our life, whether we die in the next hour or not, whether we find ourselves more peaceful and compassionate or not. We are made for the divine Beloved. We are made to fall in love with Their creation. The "success" of our practice is only that we keep finding ways to show up for it as it evolves, even through arid patches, even in our confusion.

The source of life is deeply, unimaginably Good—but life is a hot mess. The Spirit sings to our spirits to join Her dance.